

# THE TENNESSEAN

## Developer hopes to lure biotechnology researchers Local company prepares to release bone graft product

BY JOSH ADAMS • THE TENNESSEAN • NOVEMBER 5, 2010

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A company doing its best to transform Middle Tennessee into a hotbed for biotechnology may be hitting its stride, and just as the economy is showing signs that the worst of the Great Recession may be over.

BioMimetic, since 2005 the lone tenant of a partially constructed haven designed to cater to medical research firms, is closer than ever to finally having neighbors. According to Debra Viols, a real estate broker working with the site's developer, lease negotiations with two companies could soon bolster the Cool Springs Life Sciences campus and bring further credibility to the development as a potential hub in the industry. Meanwhile, BioMimetic collected kudos for furthering a degree program in professional science that has already received national recognition.

Jim Monsor, senior vice president of operations for BioMimetic, is optimistic he's seeing tangible payoffs that should one day lead to a robust biotechnology sector here.



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Kelly Oliver, a researcher at BioMimetic, talks with Eric Elmquist, an associate scientist, in the lab at Cool Springs Life Sciences Center in Franklin. Several factors are aligning to make the area fertile ground to become a hotbed for biotechnology. (JAE S. LEE / THE TENNESSEAN)

"More and more you start to see spokes of the wheel connect," Monsor said.

There's plenty at stake for taxpayers and investors with the Cool Springs Life Sciences project. A state grant of \$5 million is in play, local tax breaks are on the table and in the private sector it takes millions of dollars and years of research to develop a product for which there's no guarantee of a profit — or even approval from the federal government to put it on the market.

BioMimetic has focused on orthopedic therapies and expects the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in mid-2011 to approve a synthetic product called Augment Bone Graft for foot and ankle fusions. A version of the product may also be injected to help heal fractures.

### **Buildings have ample space**

The developer behind the Cool Springs campus, John Weckesser, has a vision for at least three buildings on the site and the going strategy is to tempt researchers with readily available lab space.

BioMimetic occupies the first structure, and the shell of a second building stands ready for occupants. As tenants move into the 60,000 square feet of this building, expectations are that Weckesser will begin work on the third building to maintain that supply of laboratories.

Keeping ahead of the market, said Matt Lagen, director of economic development for Williamson County, is what will attract companies.

"That is what sets us apart. That's the location they're going to want," Lagen said of prospective biotech firms. BioMimetic has a lease for the third floor of the second building and in the coming weeks expects to begin building out 8,000 square feet of warehousing, distribution and manufacturing space for its Augment product. Viols said, too, that Weckesser owns an additional five acres adjacent to the site and stands ready to build further.

### **MTSU offers unique program**

BioMimetic also is a partner with Middle Tennessee State University in the school's master's level professional science program. It is the only such degree offered in the state and, according to Saeed Foroudastan, director of the master's program, is the fastest growing graduate program on campus. It was launched in 2005 with only three students and today has more than 70.

The professional science discipline is a mix of business and lab studies designed to provide a work force for this growing niche. Biostatistics, biotechnology and health care informatics are the concentrations that companies such as Monsor's could come to rely on for new workers. Monsor said his company has already hired two of the three MTSU interns it hosted.

Tennessee schools hand out too few science degrees to lure industry investors to the state, so a program such as the one at MTSU is a step in the right direction, Lagen said.

"You have to prove you've got the work force in place, or a custom program to train the work force," Lagen said.

"The most important infrastructure for biotech is the work force."